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FURTHER TO MY EGG: THE STORY OF AN AUSTRALIAN LIBRARY CAMPAIGN

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Illustrated by Simon Kneebone

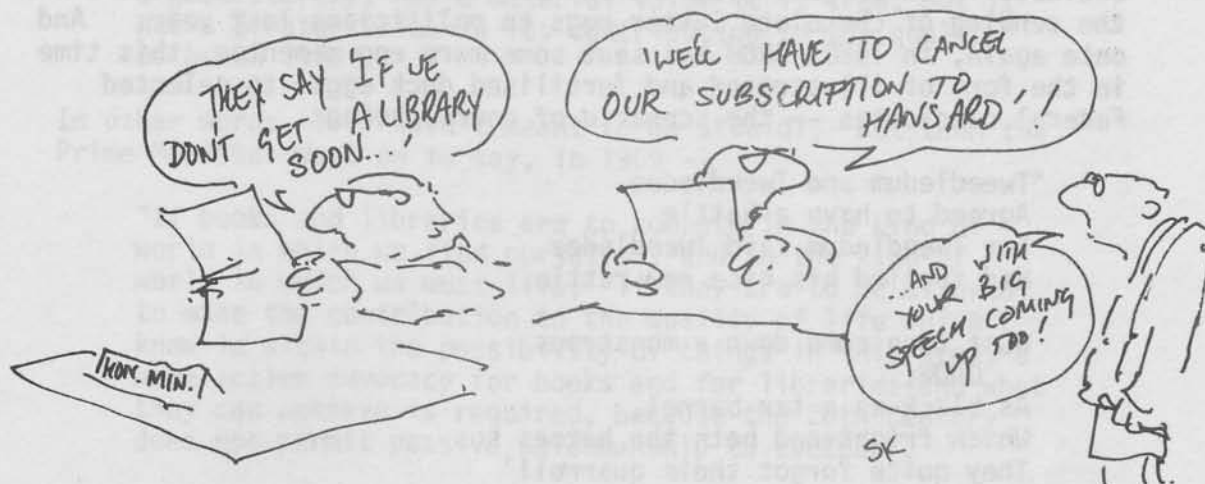


I have the honour of belonging to CROW (Concerned Residents of the Western suburbs of Adelaide, S.A.). This is a story of urbane guerillas dedicated to the provision of better public library services throughout Australia. We CROWs strongly believe in the idea of the individual in Australian society growing in strength and power as his access to ideas, inspiration, and information becomes greater, and we believe that a strong national network of public libraries is essential for this process. In other words, CROW is of the firm opinion that Australia needs an intellectual "resources boom" to match our current mining one.



Our organisation arose in 1974 out of a widely-held feeling of regional dissatisfaction with our almost non-existent public library services.

To give a brief 'crow'nology. In Australian Library Week 1974 we set up the Levels Library at the South Australian Institute of Technology as if it were a community library and we got more than 300 people to travel the 12 miles from the Black Diamond Corner to contrast Port Adelaide resources poverty with Levels luxury. Then, in Australian Library Week 1975, we CROWs hired an old shoe shop -- because it had shelves in it! -- along Semaphore Road, filled it up with resources, and got a whole lot more people to check out some possibilities. These activities resulted in thousands of signatures to "prayerful" and "duty bound" petitions which a humble CROW sent off to our Australian Federal "Holy City" of Canberra.



Then, on April 1, 1976 - the date is significant! - the Horton Report into Public Libraries in Australia was handed to our Federal Parliament. And nothing happened, and went on happening. So we decided to stop being humble and to go in for some calculated community disorganisation. We proclaimed that CROW companies representative of the whole 250,000 of us would, in Australian Library Week 1977, clean the whole State Library out of books, cassettes and anything else that was borrowable. If you can drink a pub dry, we reckoned, then you can borrow a library empty. Anyway - at least this is CROW's version of history! - the thought of the Great Borrow proved to be too much for our State Premier Dunstan and he called a sudden election just before Australian Library Week 1977 -- and his very first election promise was to provide \$2,000,000 for public libraries in the West! As a result we now have 11 public library services whereas we had only one in 1977. The trouble is that our library services are so embryo - a problem shared by many library services around Australia - that we need further sustenance and this, in CROW's opinion, can only be supplied by Federal aid, that is, by the implementation of the modest proposals of the Horton Report into Public Libraries in Australia, a report that our Federal Government has been steadfastly ignoring ever since it was presented to them in 1976.

We CROws therefore resolved to continue. And we decided, early on, to fight as much as possible of our campaign out of children's books. So we wrote to Dr. Seuss, the author of Horton Hatches the Egg, and he said, in reply, "I and my friend Horton the Elephant are both very proud and happy to be of some usefulness to your library project, and wish it all the success that it so rightly deserves!" From that time on, to all intents and purposes, the egg became the report, and all our efforts were directed towards the hatching of the egg. As a result, we have used the joyful symbolism of the egg ever since -- as witness the sending of egg powder enclosed in an origami elephant in 1977 to all Federal candidates and the sending of chocolate Easter eggs to politicians last year. And once again, in 1980, CROW has sent some more egg mementos, this time in the form of illustrated and fertilised duck eggs, to selected Federal candidates -- the scenario of course being:

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee
 Agreed to have a battle
 For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
 Had spoiled his nice new rattle.

Just then came down a monstrous
 CROW,
 As black as a tar barrel,
 Which frightened both the heroes so,
 They quite forgot their quarrel!"



Or so we hope! And, by now, there has been reposing for some time in each of the Canberra 'duckholes' of Fraser, Chipp, Hayden, Ellicott, and Ryan an egg, with a caricature and some words on it.



In the case of the Prime Minister, his words are really coming home to roost! They are from a speech he gave in 1969, as Minister for Education and Science, when he was opening the Library Association of Australia's 15th Biennial Conference in Adelaide. With the first paragraph on his egg every liberal-minded person in Australia must be in hand-wringing agreement:-

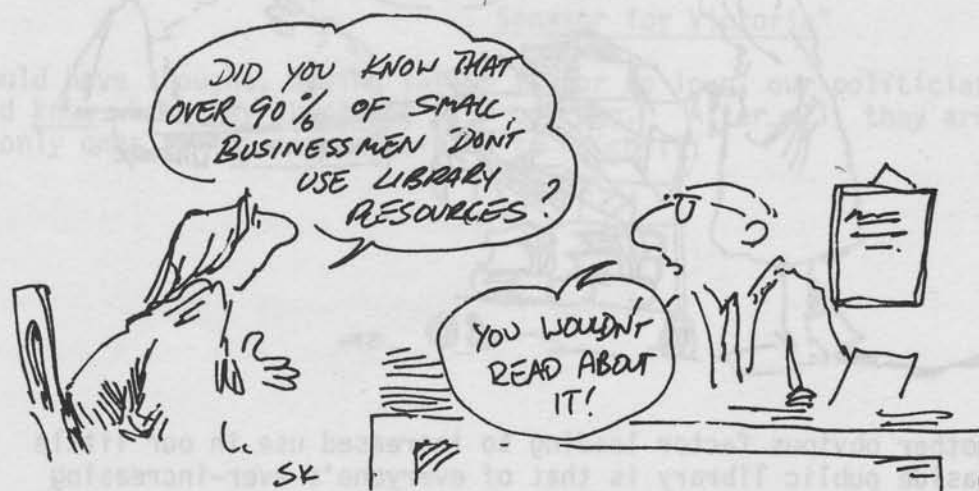
"The things that really add something to progress", said Mr. Fraser, "are those which can add to the quality of life, to the quality of existence ... A good book, more, a good library, has a material value it is true, but it has a greater value in its contribution to the quality of human life".

In other words, life wasn't meant to be stupid! But then the Prime Minister went on to say, in 1969 -

"If books and libraries are to compete in the kind of world in which we find ourselves, and in the kind of world in which we must live; if they are to be allowed to make the contribution to the quality of life which I know is within the possibility of things in this area, a more active advocacy for books and for libraries and what they can achieve is required, because the 20th Century does not permit passive salesmanship to succeed".

And Horton does indeed mention one alarming example of what looks like library passivity, in the world of Australian business:-

"... great demands have not been placed on free State Library services by small businessmen", says Horton. "Of the 920 small manufacturers who recently responded to a questionnaire 1 per cent had approached the Research Service of the State Library of N.S.W. for advice on a technical or production problem 'most often', 3.4 per cent had approached it 'less often', and 95.7 per cent had never approached it at all!" (my emphasis)



From the above one does perhaps get a picture of underserving passivity --- introverted librarians whispering Uriah Heep-like secrets into the holes in catalogue cards is the usual stereotype. But all stereotypes are boring and most of them are untrue. There are dynamic librarians. Casanova was one -- admittedly after he had lost interest in other things!--; and Chairman Mao was in his early days a Deputy Librarian at the University of Peking. And there are plenty of dynamic librarians right here in Australia.

The real position is that all our Australian Public and State libraries are critically over-extended, understaffed, and undersubsidized to such a degree that they simply don't have the staff for a "more active advocacy" in the community - to quote the P.M. again. Our public sector libraries are flat out just dealing with the people who come in through the front door. Therefore, our Horton proposals must be looked upon, quite simply, as a rescue operation!

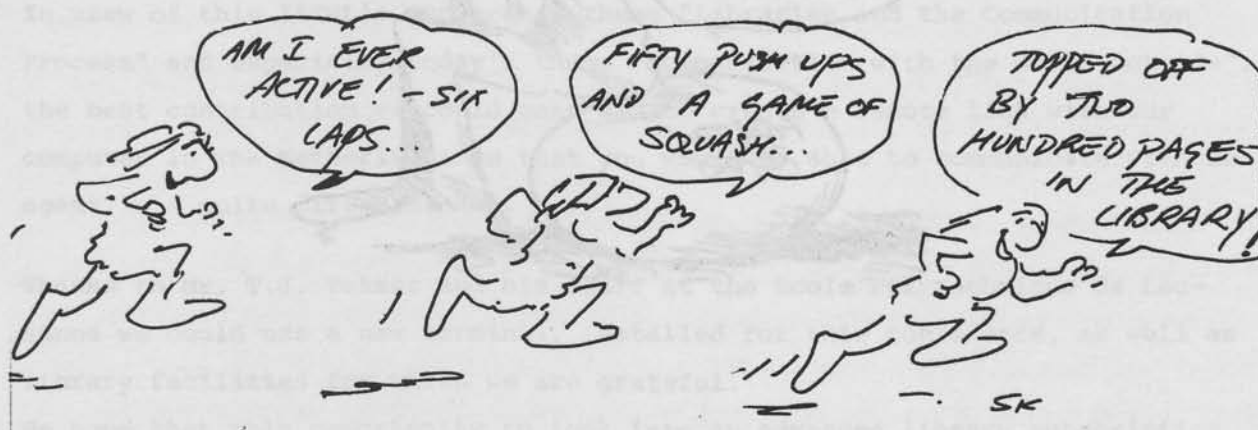
And rescue in the face of a tidal wave of public demands on all of our libraries, Public and State. Just take my own local CROW library --- one of those we "terrified" Don Dunstan into giving us! --- the Semaphore Public Library. When it was set up a couple of years ago in an old supermarket shopfront on Semaphore Road State Library officers calculated, from the population on our Le Fevre peninsula, just how many borrowers there were likely to be in 4 years time. In the event, their four-year estimate was broken in the first 5 months! Paul Hamlyn always says it is easy to sell books in an Age of Anxiety. But there is much more to it than that.



Another obvious factor leading to increased use in our little seaside public library is that of everyone's ever-increasing leisure time here in Australia.

But this is still only a partial answer. A survey in a recent issue (February 1979) of American Libraries has the answer. This survey puts paid to another tired stereotype, the old one of the typical library user as an inert, shy, passive bookworm. The data from this American survey tells us that -

"Library use is most highly related to activity. An individual who is active in other aspects of life, whether it be community organizations, politics, work, or sports, is also likely to be a library user. Libraries are simply a part of the lifestyle of active people! (my emphasis).



Now, finally, let's get back to our five politicians in receipt of egg-letters. The two best replies we CROWS have received are: a charming letter from Senator Ryan, thanking us for her "hand-crafted egg", and a poignant letter from Senator Chipp:-

"Thank you for your letter of 10th October ... Perhaps you might now tell me what do I do with the bloody egg?
Warm regards,

Yours sincerely,

DON CHIPP
Senator for Victoria"

I would have thought, having sat on it for so long, our politicians would know what they should do with our egg. After all, they are the only ones in the right position to hatch it!



